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MAURICE MAETERLINCK AS A DRAMATIC ARTIST.

MODERN drama, socialistic, reactionary, and revolutionary, ever since Nora Helmer left her home in quest of the truth, is to-day in a stage of rapid evolution. Freytag wrote his classic on the technic of the drama before Henrik Ibsen had written his great social dramas of modern life, which now invite the attention of all his contemporaries. Hauptmann, Sudermann, and Maeterlinck had not written a single one of their distinctive, new-century dramas; they were either babes or unborn.

I.

The questions of æsthetics aroused by these daring thinkers and artists are now daily discussed; but Freytag's successor has not yet appeared to justify to the artistic and, it may be said, to the scientific conscience the most modern forms of tragic art. How shall we classify what Edmund Gosse calls Ibsen's exclusive invention, "the drama of catastrophe"? Is grandeur of soul a necessary quality of the tragic hero? If this be granted, how shall we justify the innovation of such unideal protagonists as the moral pervert, Hedda Gabler, in the play of that name, the degraded teamster who gives the title to "Fuhrmann Henschel," or the struggling and starving peasants in "Die Weber?" Are we to treat them cavalierly, as Hapgood does, when he declares that it is a fundamental law of the drama to place ideal characters in ideal situations? If the dramatist neglects that law, he must go—the law remains. Recognizing *la pitié sociale* as the inspiration and the perfecting of civil life as the motive of the Ibsenian drama, shall we still accept the Aristotelian doctrine of pity and fear as the basis of the tragic emotions? Does the choice lie between the pessimistic, half-cynical theory of M. Faguet and the optimistic, human view of Herr Volkeldt? Shall we depreciate the humanitarian drama, the drama with a purpose, just because it

has an obvious moral, or shall we agree with Goethe, *le plus grand des critiques modernes et de tous les temps*, in his remark that he did not object to a dramatic poet having a moral influence in view, provided he gave his subject effective and artistic treatment?

Maurice Maeterlinck said not long ago: "The poet who could find to-day, in material science, the unknown that surrounds us, or, in his own heart, the equivalent for ancient fatality—a force that is of equally resistless predestination, a force as universally admitted—would infallibly produce a masterpiece." He believes, however, that this supposition is none too likely to be realized, although he does not refer to Ibsen and Hauptmann in their masterly attempts at the realization of this hope. In the "Ghosts" of Ibsen, the "Vor Sonnenaufgang" of Hauptmann, the "Les Avariés" of Brioux, the "Atonement" of Potapenko, and in other recent dramas, heredity has taken on a guise and assumed proportions almost as menacing as those of the Greek Nemesis. The persistent recurrence of such dramas suggests the natural query: To what extent is the dramatist warranted in treating the biological theory of heredity as fixed and unalterable law?

These and many other delicate and complex questions, raised by the modern dramatist as an interpreter of life, will ultimately have to be answered by the dramatic critic and by the dramatic public. These problems are too near to us, perhaps, for the dramatic critic of to-day to give us the just and definitive solution, yet it is a matter of regret that Mr. Matthews, in his "Development of the Drama," did not seek to throw any light upon these vexed questions, the settlement of which so vitally concerns the evolution of dramatic art.

Ibsen can scarcely be called popular on the stage, although he is regarded as the greatest living dramatist; nor can Hauptmann and Sudermann be said to have reached a wide public outside of their own country. So strange, so unquiet, often so incomprehensible are Maeterlinck's plays that it seems not unreasonable to suppose that they will never touch the masses. Those of his plays—by no means all—which have been staged have not always met with unquestioned success. In a sense,

then, the dramatic public may be said to have already registered its verdict. Still there are few students of the modern drama, it is claimed, who can truthfully deny that the reputation of Ibsen, of Sudermann, of Hauptmann, and of Maeterlinck is steadily waxing rather than waning with the passage of time. With the growing enlightenment and education of the dramatic public in the school of the naturalistic and symbolic drama, these dramatists are slowly but inevitably gaining greater and more universal appreciation.

Maurice Maeterlinck, a dramatic artist of unusual, perhaps it would not be exaggeration to say phenomenal talent, has suffered unmercifully at the hands of his critics. And only too often he has suffered from the false standards of comparison by which he has been measured. He is judged too often not by his possible failure to attain the ideal he has set for himself but by his failure to attain the ideal set by some one else. He has been called everything that he is not, everything that he does not aspire to be, from degenerate to Shakespeare. He is maligned for presenting too much action in "*La Princesse Maleine*"; he is held up to ridicule for presenting none at all in "*L'Intruse*." He is looked upon by many as the Apostle of the New Decadentism; yet it was the late Richard Hovey, I believe, who called him "the greatest living poet of love, if not the greatest poet of love that ever lived." He is even commiserated for not being "Dickensy," for not infusing into such a mystic and symbolic poem as "*Les Sept Princesses*" the robust humor of Martin Chuzzlewit!

When we test M. Maeterlinck's dramas by the clearly formulated laws of dramatic art, as expounded by the leading dramatic critics, we are forced at once to the admission that his dramas do not comply with these laws. Take, for instance, one most important law of the drama, as recently stated by M. Ferdinand Brunetière. In his statement the drama is differentiated from the other forms of literature, in that it must always deal with some exertion of the human will. To interest us, he claims, a drama must present a struggle, its chief character must desire something with all the forces of his being. We look in vain for such a quality in a number of M.

Maeterlinck's so-called dramas. The morbid obsession and terrified imaginings of a child in the dark, the mystic and ineffable beauty of seven sleeping princesses in a barren castle beside the sobbing sea, the invisible, disquieting, terrifying image of death stealing in, during the lonely watches of the night, upon a family gathered together near the bedside of a loved one—in these dusky and shadowy pictures of hallucination, terror, and mystic suggestion is found no figure of determined will, striding with dominant step across the stage, resolute in seeking his own ends. The law as formulated by M. Brunetière is not fulfilled in these no-plot dramas.

II.

If M. Maeterlinck's plays, certainly a number of them, do not fulfill the conditions of the drama, as enunciated by dramatic critics, yet they resemble so strikingly certain other art forms as to deserve consideration in that respect. Mr. Brander Matthews's definition of the Short-story, a genuine contribution to the criticism of fictional forms, and M. Anatole France's celebrated definition of criticism seem to fit certain of Maeterlinck's plays as though the generalizations had been made from them.

Mr. Matthews shows much critical acumen in his discussion of the philosophy of the Short-story. After making clever and well-founded distinctions between the Novel and the Novelette, the Novel and the Short-story, and the Short-story and the story which is merely short, he gives a clear-cut definition of the Short-story, upon which he justly plumes himself. His contention is that the Short-story must always convey essential unity of impression, or, as Poe phrased it, a totality of effect. From many examples of the Short-story, which are considered the finest types of that form, Mr. Matthews reaches the conclusion that no one has ever succeeded as a writer of Short-stories who has not ingenuity, originality, and compression, and that most of those who have succeeded in this line had also the touch of fantasy.

Take M. Maeterlinck's "*L'Intruse*," for instance, and consider it in the light of Mr. Matthews's definition of the Short-

story. A wonderfully convincing study in hallucination, this play is the most striking, awe-compelling, and, withal, the most original of all of the no-plot dramas of M. Maeterlinck.

The grandfather, blind and helpless, is seated in his arm-chair, with his three granddaughters around him. The old man's beloved daughter has given birth to a child, and lies ill in the inner chamber. The atmosphere is pregnant with catastrophe, the senses are chilled by the intimation of impending misfortune. Overbrooded by anticipant foreboding, the grandfather feels the approach of death. His senses, subtle and acute beyond their wont, from his blindness perhaps, give him unmistakable warning. The gradual approach of some unseen being, the fright of the swans, the hush of nature, the sharpening of the scythe, the opening of the house door, the footsteps on the stair, the fitful gleams and sudden extinguishment of the lamp—the significance of all these signs and portents is divined by the blind old grandfather alone. When finally some one is heard to rise in the pitchy blackness of the sitting room, the old man shudders with peculiar horror. The door of the inner chamber is opened, and a Sister of Charity announces by a sign that his daughter is dead. The Intruder has at last gained admittance.

This little play, which the late Richard Hovey declared left an ineffaceable impression upon him the only time he ever saw it presented, carries the stamp of that unity of impression, that totality of effect which is an essential characteristic of the Short-story. It is scarcely necessary to comment upon the ingenuity and originality displayed in the entire conception. The art which well-nigh makes the impalpable invade the realm of the tangible, the supernatural to place one foot over the border line of the natural, is exhibited here in an advanced state of perfection. The touch of fantasy lurks in every line, every feature of the play. In "L'Intruse" as a psychologic concept, a deep and penetrating insight into subjective states of mind, in direct correspondence with movements in the supernatural world, is revealed with bizarre and subtle artistry. It is not so much that M. Maeterlinck has created a new shiver, as Victor Hugo said of Baudelaire, but that he has evoked a

shiver in a novel and startling way. As a finished study in hallucination, "L'Intruse" is a radical departure from the drama of material action—it is a dramatized Short-story of psychic suggestion.

"L'Intruse" was chosen as an illustration of the dramatized Short-story because it excels all the other no-plot dramas of M. Maeterlinck in power and inevitableness. Perhaps "Les Aveugles," because of the quiescence and paralyzed initiative of the groping blind men, and because, too, its conclusion is not "short, sharp, and shocking," comes nearer being a Sketch cast in dramatic form than a dramatized Short-story; but certainly "Les Sept Princesses" and "Interieur" are examples of the latter form, as clearly as is "L'Intruse." The artistic kinship of Maeterlinck with De Maupassant, Baudelaire, and Poe becomes all the more patent when we recognize M. Maeterlinck's no-plot dramas not only as occult studies in hallucination but as dramatized versions of the perfected art-form of these masters of the Short-story.

Besides these no-plot dramas of M. Maeterlinck, there are certain others, marked by a clear thread of plot, more or less definite characterization, and somewhat vague motivation, which are very interesting as illustrations and exemplifications of M. Anatole France's ideas on criticism. Self-revelation and self-expression, in the opinion of that refined and polished *prosateur*, is the basic quality of criticism, and in his celebrated article on the subject he defined criticism as "The adventures of a soul among masterpieces." In further amplification of this idea he added: "In order to be frank, the critic ought to say, Gentlemen, I am about to speak of myself, *à propos* of Shakespeare or Racine or Pascal or Goethe—by no means a bad opportunity."

Several of M. Maeterlinck's dramas—notably two, "La Princesse Maleine" and "Pelléas et Mélisande"—might not inappropriately be described as the adventures of M. Maeterlinck's personality among masterpieces. If Prof. William L. Phelps's charge of M. Maeterlinck's indebtedness to Browning's "Luria"¹ for much of the plot and some of the leading charac-

¹ Since this article was written, Professor Phelps has received a reply to

ters in "Monna Vanna" be sustained, then "La Princesse Maleine," "Pélléas et Mélisande," and "Monna Vanna" may all be classed together as interpretations and modifications by a new-century mystic of dramatic characters formerly interpreted by other great poets.

When Max Nordau contemptuously characterized "La Princesse Maleine" as a sort of cento out of Shakespeare, a "Shakespeare anthology for children and Patagonians," he was giving expression to the same idea from an obverse point of view that prompted the brilliant author of "Les Affaires sont Les Affaires" to dub Maurice Maeterlinck the "Belgian Shakespeare." One is inclined rather to agree with Zangwill in his remark that, if Maeterlinck be not the "Belgian Shakespeare," certainly he may, with truth, be called a Shakespearean Belgian. No sympathetic student of Shakespeare can fail to recognize the Hamlet of irresolution and pale cast of thought in Hjalmar, a composite of Juliet and Ophelia in Maleine, the nurse of "Romeo and Juliet" in the nurse of Maeterlinck's anthological play, the frenzied Lear in the old King, and Lady Macbeth in Queen Anne. Disguised in some measure by the vague and impressionist touches of the mystic's brush, the resemblance is not to be concealed, the lineaments are virtually the same. The presentment, though counterfeit, is none the less a presentment. A liberal interpretation of M. Maeterlinck's remark that he tries to write Shakespeare for a theater of marionettes would credit M. Maeterlinck with a redistribution of values in Shakespeare's themes and personages, demanded by the newer psychology and the newer mysticism.

That passage in the fifth canto of Dante's "Inferno," which

the letter he wrote to the Belgian dramatist to clear the matter up. In that letter M. Maeterlinck says: "You are entirely right; between an episodic scene of my second act—that in which Prinzivalle unmasks Trivulzio—and one of the great scenes of 'Luria' there exists a similarity which I am astonished was not pointed out earlier. I am the more astonished because, far from concealing this similarity, I took pains myself to indicate it by using exactly the same hostile towns, the same epoch, and almost the same persons—although it would have been quite easy to transpose the whole and render the borrowing unrecognizable, if my intention had been to dissimulate."

has been called the most beautiful in all poetry of the pity and the tragedy of love, furnished to M. Maeterlinck the story of his drama of "Pélléas et Mélisande." He did not, as did Mr. Phillips, Mr. Crawford, and Signor D'Annunzio, write explicitly on the Da Rimini theme. He veiled the source of his drama in the unindicative title of "Pélléas et Mélisande." The scene is laid in some nameless country, and the story is projected into a gloomy setting of old forgotten castles. Nevertheless, in all its spiritual as well as material aspects, the story is well-nigh identical with that of the two who go forever on the accursed air. It is as close to the recorded data of the story as the other plays based explicitly on the story of Rimini, with the single exception of the play of Crawford. Paolo and Francesco are prototypes of Pélléas and Mélisande, Gianciotto of Golaud, and Concordia, Gianciotto's daughter, of Yniold, the little son of Golaud. The rôle of unconscious informer is played by the child of the unloved husband, by Concordia in Crawford's, by Yniold in Maeterlinck's play.

"Monna Vanna" certainly bears a striking resemblance to Browning's "Luria" in its substructure and some of its details. The betrayer and the betrayed, the mercenary and the patriot, play almost identical parts in the two plays. Indeed, it would seem very probable, after a careful study of both dramas, that Maeterlinck is indebted to Browning for some of the facts and motives, as well as the locality, era, and basal structure of the earlier part of "Monna Vanna." It must be emphasized, however, in justice to M. Maeterlinck that the intent and tendency of "Monna Vanna," with its predominant love-motive, has no point of contact here with "Luria," which does not touch upon the desire of man for woman.

"La Princesse Maleine," "Pélléas et Mélisande," and "Monna Vanna" all evidence how carefully and sympathetically M. Maeterlinck has read his Shakespeare, his Dante, and his Browning. And in every case his adaptation, modification, or amplification of the facts, material or spiritual, and his re-presentation of the characters he has chosen to reincarnate, reveal an individuality, a distinctive habit of mind, and an originality of depiction which mark an exceptional and unusual talent.

The three plays, with their haunting beauty, dreamy sentiment, and gentle melancholy, suffused, too, with a sort of lunar brilliance, are the personal impressions M. Maeterlinck has given us of his adventures among the masterpieces of Shakespeare, Dante, and Browning.

III.

As a dramatic artist, M. Maeterlinck's history is both interesting and unique. Out of the fullness of his first artistic impulse he wrote a number of plays, freighted with symbolism, and surcharged with thoughts of almost superhuman implication. Then he took up his own plays, as any critic might have done, and drew from them certain conclusions concerning a new theory of dramatic art, out of which he formulated his conception of a "static theater"—an analytic method reminding one strongly of Poe's dissection of his poem "The Raven," in his celebrated essay, "The Philosophy of Composition." Maeterlinck's subsequent study, and the deeper insight into certain principles he thus acquired, led him to reject the philosophy of his earlier plays. In a striking article in the *Fortnightly Review*, entitled "The Evolution of Mystery," he analyzes the philosophy of his own little dramas, and is led to the conclusion that the conception of life there revealed is not healthy; that it is "one of those profound but sterile truths which the poet may salute as he passes on his way," but with which he should not abide.

His greatest drama, "Monna Vanna," was first produced at Paris in June, 1902, subsequently played to enthusiastic audiences in Belgium and Austria, with Mme. Maeterlinck in the title rôle, forbidden production in England by the dramatic censor, and presented for the first time in America at the Irving Place Theater, on December 17 last. The great poetic beauty and structural symmetry of this play mark it as Maeterlinck's supreme dramatic achievement. The characters are natural rather than supernatural, human rather than superhuman, and the action is rapid, stirring, and animated. Maeterlinck here shows the final evolution of his dramatic instinct and talent into the human drama of action, motive, and responsibility to be in perfect consonance with the principles of dra-

matic art as propounded by the greatest critics and philosophers.

Maeterlinck's new romantic-symbolical drama, "Joyzelle," is more in the key of his earlier productions than in that of "Monna Vanna." This most recent drama of M. Maeterlinck, produced at the *Gymnase* in Paris in June, 1903, is intermediate in tendency and artistic purpose between his earlier dramas and the realistic "Monna Vanna." In the words of M. Maeterlinck: "It represents the triumph of will and love over destiny or fatality, as against the converse lesson of 'Monna Vanna.' " In this drama Maeterlinck's distinctively symbolic method finds the same full play as in "Pelléas et Mélisande," "Les Sept Princesses," and "La Princesse Maleine," yet does not lose itself, as in those plays, in vague obscurity and paradoxical profundity. The success it met with in Paris at the hands of a brilliant company of authors, literators, and critics, was ample testimony to its imaginative and poetic beauty.

Ibsen has deeply influenced his contemporaries, drama can never be just the same again, as Bernard Shaw said, since Ibsen has written, but his message has been delivered. Hauptmann, at one time giving almost certain promise of carrying on the work of Ibsen, has turned from modern life in his effort to evoke the shade of "Poor Henry." Sudermann, whose "Heimat" and more recent "Es Lebe das Leben" are perhaps the most signal examples of his ability to portray modern social conditions and social evils, has recently disappointed the world by his reactionary and enigmatical drama of past politics, "Der Sturmgesele Socrates." It is to be hoped that, for M. Maeterlinck, "Joyzelle," poetically beautiful as it undoubtedly is, may prove to be only a temporary reversion to type. Now that M. Maeterlinck has shown us such a rare flower of his exotic talent as "Monna Vanna," the world awaits with eagerness the free and full efflorescence of his genius. May he give to us that new theater of which he has spoken so eloquently and so beautifully—"a theater of peace and happiness, and of beauty without tears!"

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